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A program is described in which physically disabled adults were hired as teacher aides to work in mainstreamed classrooms. It was found that these aides not only served as role models for handicapped children but also increased the sensitivity of normal students. (JD)

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THE "DIFF-ENFRANCHISED" RETURN TO THE MAINSTREAM

BY

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THE "DIFF-ENFRANCHISED" RETURN TO THE MAINSTREAM

A major recommendation of the NEA Study Panel on the Education of Handicapped Children concerned the responsibilities of state departments of education and institutions of higher learning. Both groups were charged with the responsibility to work with classroom teachers to develop programs to shape attitudes and sensitivities toward individuals with handicapping conditions, programs that would enable teachers to overcome prejudices and fears directed toward the handicapped and to relate more openly and effectively with them. (Today's Education, Sept/Oct., 1978.)

The Responsive Education Program for Special Needs Kids placed four disabled adults and one mother of a cerebral palsy child as teaching assistants in classrooms in two California schools. Jill Rosenquist, principal of the Cornell Elementary School in Albany, California, reports that the presence of disabled persons on the staff allayed fears and anxieties about all disabilities and how to relate to them. She says that because of the ease with which the disabled adults interacted with the school staff in the school environment, she was reassured that disabled adults belong in the school. According to her, the staff showed the highest admiration for the assistants and expressed their admiration openly. "The teaching assistants raised our consciousness," she says.

"We didn't try to second guess their needs; we asked how we could help. The openness of the assistants and their willingness to correct misunderstandings about disability was a real positive presence for us. In addition, the assistants were invited into other non-assigned classrooms to talk to the students and teachers about differences and disability."

The educational basis of the Special Needs Kids program centered on three principles: that cognitive growth is supported by the development of problem-solving abilities; that affective growth is fostered by healthy self-concepts; and that social growth is promoted by the development of pluralistic behaviors and attitudes, or the recognition and acceptance of differences.

The modeling effect of disabled teaching assistants reinforced problem-solving in that they introduced situations into the classrooms that required new solutions. For instance, a blind aide cannot see raised hands: students must verbalize for attention and then request information or assistance in a clear and explicit way. In their daily lives disabled persons constantly confront situations requiring flexibility and problem-solving skills. The classroom is yet another area where they, the teachers, and the students, too, adjusted procedures or behaviors to respond to their special needs. Healthy self-concepts were presented to the students by the disabled adults who had overcome tremendous physical, social and emotional barriers and learned to function as able, competent adults. They talked about their disabilities as functional nuisances to which they had adapted. They moved about the classrooms and schools as obvious visual "testaments" to their differences and their abilities to live with those differences, to talk openly about them, and to encourage other learning styles among children whose learning or pace might differ from the class "norm" or whose color or language was not of the "mainstream". By their very presence they acted as agents of change to enhance the quality of experience in the classroom.

In addition to their personal experiences with disability and differences, all the assistants brought to the project some training in education, special education, or with children. Lani Collins, assisting in a pre-kindergarten class, is acoustically handicapped. Before joining the project, she completed a B.A. in liberal arts and worked in two state hospitals for the emotionally disturbed. She plans to obtain a teaching credential and a special education credential. Diane Corsentino, a post polio assisting in a kindergarten class, counselled terminally ill children in a variety of hospital settings before joining the staff at Cornell. Peggy Torstrom, another post polio teaching assistant, worked in a second grade class. She is the mother of three children who graduated from the same school where she taught. Catherine Amos, the mother of a cerebral palsy kindergartner, is completing her B.A. in speech pathology and audiology and has had clinical experience with speech differences. She assisted in a first grade class. Sherri Fizer, who became totally blind three years ago, grew up in a home centered around education: her father was a principal and superintendent of schools. Before Sherri became blind she volunteered in a second grade classroom. In Albany, she assisted in a fourth grade class.

Prior to their entry into the classrooms in March, 1978, the assistants were introduced to the principles of responsive education by the staff developer Trent Taylor who continued bi-monthly, inservice training with them. Each assistant eventually wrote an Individual Professional Program (IPP)* for her own growth in the classroom. In addition to the support and

* The I.P.P., A Responsive Approach to Staff Development, Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, 1855 Folsom Street, San Francisco, CA. 94103.

trusting relationship fostered between Trent and the TA's, they were encouraged to actively share their experiences with one another at weekly luncheon meetings. In September, 1978, the five assistants began writing or taping journals of their observations, experiences, feelings, and problems. At first, they reported factual information about what they taught. Gradually, they began focusing on the way they communicated with the children and the way the children communicated with them. They began differentiating individual behaviors and learning modes. In their journals they wrote of their participation in lessons focusing on similarities and differences. They also wrote of their attention to the special needs children in the classrooms. Their journal entries, in addition to talks with them and with the regular classroom teachers, provide evidence that the use of disabled persons in public education may well be one of the most potent new ideas for diff-enfranchising, i.e., helping those who are different to find a place in the mainstream.

Because of her special hearing needs as a child and her related experiences in school, Lani Collins brought special insight to the problems of a disruptive hearing disabled pre-kindergartner. Of her own education Lani recalls she had been expected to perform as a normal child and she remembers clearly her frustrations because she couldn't. She was told that she was failing in school because she wasn't paying attention. Her high test scores put her in a group with high achieving students where she couldn't keep up. She would then be grouped with average students and she would be bored. Until she was in fourth grade, she see-sawed back and forth from group to group relying primarily on lip-reading and notes on the blackboard. "I thought there was

gross negligence on the part of educators because they did not diagnose my difference."

In the pre-kindergarten class which she taught, Lani was immediately aware that one disruptive boy was hearing disabled. Since the age of one, he had been placed in special education classes because of his behavior. As a result of Lani's persistence, the child has now been officially diagnosed as hearing disabled and has been equipped with hearing aids.

Lani, who relates physically to the children, soon discovered that the tantrums of this isolated boy could be quieted by physical contact. "I discovered by accident that the boy loved to have his tummy tickled or his back stroked. Knowing this, I set up a situation to establish trust. I told him if he wanted me to stop stroking him, I would stop. When he said stop, I stopped immediately. His body was so relaxed. An adult was actually listening and responding to him. Then he said go and I tickled him for another second and a half. We did this for about five minutes. Now he comes up to me and says, 'rub tummy' when he needs to be touched." Because of the loss of one of her senses, Lani is more aware of the tactile needs in children.

"When this boy first came into the classroom, he was the toughest macho. Nothing hurt him. He would have an accident and I would ask him if that hurt and he'd say 'Nah. Didn't hurt.' Yesterday, he actually cried real tears because he was hit in the head with a ball, so I cuddled him. I was already cuddling two children, so I added him to the group." The children are aware that touching Lani is ok.

Lani and the regular teacher encourage the children to ask fully for what they need. They taught them to speak more distinctly and directly to the disabled T.A. Now the kids understand and accept her individual needs;

they are comfortable with her slight atonal speech difference and they know that she wears hearing aids which she showed and described to them. Lani believes that much of the change in the disruptive child's self-concept occurred because he now has a role model. He understands it's ok to make a mistake in talking as long as he continues to practice. He is beginning to accept his own difference and needs and acts out less in frustrating situations. She also taught him some sign language.

Nadine Verrelli, the regular classroom teacher, points to a special contribution Lani made to her teaching. She says because of the assistant's need for direct eye contact when talking to students, she's become more aware of focusing on the individual child to whom she wishes to speak. Other para-professionals who have observed Nadine and Lani comment on the smooth and quiet transition in the classroom between activities. No one calls out the time to change activities. The two teachers quietly instruct each child about the next activity when he/she has finished a project.

Pete Smith, a kindergarten teacher, frankly admits he had a lot to learn about teaching disabled children and he thought he could learn about disability by having a disabled adult working with him in the classroom. He says, "Diane is the first disabled person I've known well, so my mind was a blank slate about disability. Being with her has taken the anxiety out of being with someone who is disabled. We've built a strong friendship/ relationship. I've learned a lot about her experiences growing up, what it is like for her to wear braces and to deal with the aftereffects of polio."

At first the teacher thought he would have to make adjustments in the physical environment of his classroom, and tables and chairs were moved to allow more space for Diane to move with her crutches and braces, but he soon

found she had more mobility than he expected. She could walk with one crutch and carry materials she needed to set up the learning stations for which she was responsible. She did have trouble keeping up with the kids on the playground and the children were cautioned about leaving toys on the floor where she might trip over them or drop food she might slip on. They were also asked not to play with her crutch or put it where she couldn't find it. "But so far as disciplining kids or chasing them down to make sure they were at the correct stations, that was not a problem. She functions like a non-disabled assistant," he concludes.

In her journal, Diane notes the increasing confidence of one disabled child who began the year almost too shy to answer a question. By the time he was four, he had already had seven surgeries for a spinal disorder, a disorder which resulted in his wearing corrective shoes and having no bladder or bowel control. Because of the extensive periods of time he'd spent in hospitals, he'd had little contact with other children. At the beginning of the year his disability embarrassed him, but by the end of the year he was taking care of his special needs himself and freely entering into classroom activities.

Because of her experiences with disability, Diane quickly noted a tendency in another special needs child to depend on other children to get crayons and scissors for her. She felt that despite the child's braces it was important for her to become more independent. At first the child was resistant to getting her own materials and cleaning up after herself, but Diane notes in her journal, "I think she's beginning to understand that she cannot depend on everyone else in class because they have their responsibilities, too."

Misunderstandings about the handicapped are often found in very young children. One day Diane was asked by a little girl why she couldn't take medicine to make it go away and why she had to wear those things on her legs. Then the child asked if she had made God mad at her. In her journal she writes, "I explained that God didn't make me sick, but that I hadn't had the polio shots to protect me as she has. I told her we didn't have the shots when I was her age. Later I talked to the kids about the word 'crippled'. I told them disabled people don't like being called that name, that it was a word used a long time ago before we found new words like 'handicapped' or 'disabled'". She continues the entry in her journal, "I hope that as we educate our kids about disability that they will take this knowledge home to their families. At least the seed is planted and maybe more support and acceptance of the handicapped will come."

Jan Antaki, the second grade teacher in whose room Peggy Torstom assisted, reports that at first she was apprehensive about disability, but that "We've talked so much about disability now that I don't even see it. It's been brought out into the open. Now we don't even see Peggy's crutches. We just see Peggy. She's just Peggy." She says that at the beginning of the year the children stared at the assistant's crutches. They wanted to touch them. The boys wanted to play with them and use them as machine guns. By touching the crutches, and later by using wheelchairs brought into the classroom for the purpose of simulating disabilities, the children learned that the equipment used by disabled people is nothing to fear. They learned that some part of a disabled person's body needs help to perform its function. Glasses, hearing aides, braces and crutches are some of the ways that the body receives that help.

Peggy worked closely with one partially deaf student who wore two hearing aides. She records in her journal that day after day during a period in October the child came to school without his aides. One day he caught her eye and pointed with both his fingers to his two ears. She wrote in her journal, "The pleasure on his face was beautiful. Later on I gave him a good hug and told him to wear them again because that really pleased me." She records on another day, 'S. wore his aids and again pointed it out to me with J. standing nearby. When I said I was pleased J. said, 'Me too. Now you can hear me' and off they ran to recess." For the rest of the year S. arrived at school wearing his aids.

When asked if she rearranged the classroom for Peggy, Jan says she didn't. She points out that the assistant can't sit on the rug on the floor with the children, but that doesn't matter. She says sometimes she scheduled her to supervise a cooking lesson and during the lesson realized that meant she stood for long periods of time and she worried her assistant might be uncomfortable, but Peggy reassured her. Peggy records in her journal, that at one point she forgot about her disability and moved without the aid of her crutch which she had told the children she could do. One of the children noticed it and said, "Oh, you can move without your crutch."

These daily contacts with a disabled person in the classroom offered many examples for the children to talk about when they studied a unit later in the year on Being Alike and Being Different. They read stories and discussed different emotions. They graphed their different physical characteristics. They decorated cakes commenting on their different abilities, and drew their own faces and talked about their differences. One lesson

ended with a child pointing out that "Mrs. Torstom is disabled but she's just like Mrs. Antaki."

Peggy says the kids are very comfortable with her now. They still touch her knee at the low tables and feel the top of her brace and they ask her when she can take it off and when she will be cured. Although she admits the questions the children ask her about her disability sometimes stir up unhappy memories for her, she concludes, "I feel with this kind of introduction to a handicapped person -- that they (the children) can feel some freedom in questioning -- means they'll be more comfortable and compassionate with the next person they meet with a disability."

Catherine Amos, an assistant in a first grade classroom, is a mother of a mild cerebral palsy kindergartner. She says, "Living with my daughter has taught me that her development has to take its own course and that kids are really determined. For instance, at one point the only thing she could do on the playground was go up and down the slide and the teachers and I became very worried about her. Her little face would get red and sweaty and we thought this was strange behavior until we realized this was the only way she could exercise and she knew it. She knew she needed it. I think from experiences like this I've learned to look at what kids need, and not at what they should do or shouldn't do."

Helen Laird, the teacher whom Catherine assisted, agrees with her assistant's assessment of her special contribution in the classroom. She says, "Catherine is especially sensitive to children. She's very patient with the pacing of children. She also lets them take risks."

"I've also learned a lot about individualizing instruction from watching Ellie's teachers in special education classes where, of course, the teacher

must individualize the learning. That's taught me to individualize my instruction for the special needs each child has."

Catherine points out that in preparing teachers to relate to special needs children in the classroom, they need to know how they feel about disabled children and how they will prepare other children in the class.

When working with teachers trying to establish a needs assessment, she couldn't get the teachers to understand that the needs to which she referred were not physical needs, where they would fit a wheelchair, for instance. She wanted to know how they felt about disability. "When a teacher understands how she feels, then she can work better with the feelings of the kids and these are what the disabled child has to face."

In a two-week unit on differences the students talked about their physical differences. They also painted by holding the brushes between their toes. This stimulated a discussion of the frustrations involved with the difficult task and what they had been able to accomplish. Feeling such items as cottage cheese and spaghetti blindfolded provoked reactions of disgust and fear. The children were encouraged to talk about how they felt about the unknown or things that were unfamiliar to them. The teachers also simulated differences by having the children take blind walks, and function in a wheelchair for an hour. They plugged up the children's ears to simulate deafness. Before their experiences, the children tended to moralize. By the end of the unit, they understood more fully the concept of individual difference.

Bob Alpert, the fourth grade teacher who works with and supervises Sherri Fizer, a blind TA, comments on the changes he's noticed in the classroom this year. He says that because of Sherri and the work on differences the present class is the most tolerant group of kids that he's ever had. They are

more tolerant of the differences among themselves and they are more open to differences they read about in literature or social studies. He also believes Sherri's presence in the class has forced the children to use language more than they have had to in the past. If they want to ask Sherri a question, they have to read the question to her and give her some background. They are probably going to have to look back and read to her. In many cases, the kids learned to think through their questions and to verbalize more exactly what they wanted to know. They also asked fewer questions and made more specific statements. In their art classes, they learned to describe to Sherri sizes, shapes, colors and their ideas about what they were drawing. On field trips and in the classroom different students had a chance to describe to Sherri what they were seeing. Bob summarizes, "The language development in the class is far ahead of what it's been in other years."

In an early entry in her journal, Sherri notes that she was working with a soft-spoken little boy who hardly answered and if he did he must have been nodding his head because she couldn't hear any response. "I finally asked him if he could give me a verbal reply because heads don't make any noise and I couldn't see his head nod. He seemed to really try and after a while he was able to give me a yes or a no."

Problem-solving in the class is an on-going process. Stories were taped for Sherri and a set of braille math books were ordered. In the beginning of the year, Sherri put each child's name in braille on his/her desk. The children took it upon themselves to remind each other to push in their chairs and move cords that might interfere with Sherri's movement around the room. One student posted a reminder on a closet door to be sure to close it.

Bob did not prepare the children for Sherri's difference. She was presented as another teacher in the classroom and was accepted first as a teacher. It wasn't until the end of September when the class went fishing that anyone began to ask Sherri questions about her blindness. They wanted to know what she could see and what was wrong with her left eye which is artificial. They wanted to feel her braille watch.

Fishing was a new experience for Sherri and she says she learned as much as the children. "I was glad at that time that I couldn't see what the fish looked like because sometimes when we look at things we don't want to touch them, but when you can't see, it makes it possible to experience with more of an open mind."

Supervising cooking classes at first caused Sherri to be nervous, but she notes in her journal that they proceeded carefully step by step. "I really praised all the boys because they did so well and they were very pleased with themselves and their accomplishments. And I'm pleased with myself. I can handle cooking. I just feel like I'm totally capable and through experiences like this I feel more confident in myself. I do them well and carefully and that makes me feel good, but it also makes the kids feel very good, too, because they see that I can do it and they can do it and it's an all around positive experience. It's really exciting."

With a carefully planned program of understanding and support, the diff- enfranchised can return to the mainstream of public schools. The presence of disability in schools has a powerful emotional impact for most adults and for some children. These reactions must be carefully understood. When seeking out and hiring disabled teachers, it's important to understand that not all persons have fully accepted their difference, a pre-requisite for handling

powerful situations which arise in the classroom. The impact of disabled adults working in the classroom is profound.

Automatically, the presence of disabled adults in classrooms opens the curriculum and encourages different ways of learning. Children learn in different ways and at different rates. A disabled adult with a need to learn and communicate differently models new ways of doing things and new ways of problem-solving. In Sherri's classroom when the students were making tangrams, a three-dimensional tangram was constructed for the blind assistant. All students and especially students with more tactile apperception could experience another way to learn the conceptual material. Blindness and deafness also contribute to language development. A blind adult makes extensive use of verbal cues. That need reinforces and extends language development skills for children. A deaf person must be visually keen and "read" a variety of signs and situations to deduce what is needed/requested. Some kids are visual learners, some auditory, some tactile. Having adults in classrooms or schools who must extend and apply the use of the senses focuses on different ways to learn.

Physically disabled adults in the classroom immediately cause the role of physical activities to be re-examined. Movement activities are examined for their appropriateness for children who are unable to move fast. As a result more sports become centered on skill and cooperation and fewer on speed and competitiveness.

Because of experiences with rejection, frustration, and loneliness, disabled adults bring unique and pointed insight into the social and emotional needs of all students. They model and encourage healthy social and emotional development. They are daily reminders of the possibility

for competence and success. As a result it becomes easier for all children to understand, discuss and accept their differences, similarities and special needs.

Because of their obvious physical differences, disabled teaching assistants or teachers cause the curriculum to examine the question of difference. The special needs adult offers any school a resource on difference. They bring people together by reducing fears of the unknown. They are available for relationship and to answer questions about disability or correct misunderstandings. Unobtrusively, the school community becomes comfortable. The assistants become advocates for awareness of special needs, provide workshops for other teachers and lead in classroom activities on difference. These efforts result in change in the language about disability, a changed language that leads to changed perception and behavior.

Materials developed in Responsive Education for Special Needs Kids Program include:

- Myths and Misunderstandings - Handicapping Conditions
- Myths and Misunderstandings - A Listing
- Responsive Supervision - An Overview
- Responsive Supervision - Observation Schedule
- Responsive Supervision - Training Manual
- Responsive Supervision - The Individual Professional Plan (IPP)
- Responsive Supervision - The IPP - A Concept Paper
- Me, My School and My Neighborhood - Differences and Similarities
- Demystify That Orthopedic Equipment
- The Special Needs Kids Resource Center
- The Diff-Enfranchised Return to the Mainstream
- Diane's Journal - The Work of A Disabled Teaching Assistant
- The Educational Significance of Difference - An Ethnographic Study
- The Environmental Forces Inventory - How To Measure Social Context
- Cross Levels Hypothesis - Aggregation of Data
- The Public Outcry for Humane Evaluation and Isomorphic Validity

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